

Flu Activity Remains Elevated Late in Season

DOVER – Although it is late in the 2018-2019 flu season, and total weekly influenza cases have begun to decrease, flu activity in Delaware and across the U.S. remains elevated with an increase in the number of influenza A (H3N2) viruses circulating over the last month. H3N2 viruses are typically associated with more severe illness in older adults, and while anyone experiencing flu-like symptoms should seek treatment quickly, it is especially important for individuals 65 years and older to do so.

As of March 23, 2019, the most recent date for which data is available, there have been 5,854 laboratory-confirmed cases of influenza in Delaware during the 2018-2019 season, 943 of which required hospitalization. These numbers reflect only lab-confirmed cases and the actual number of influenza cases in the state is likely much higher. While this year's influenza case total is much lower than the 9,051 cases reported during the 2017-2018 season – the highest total since record-keeping began in 2004 – the 2018-2019 season is now the second-highest on record.

As the total number of flu cases continues to climb, so do flu-related fatalities. This season, 20 Delawareans have passed away as a result of flu-related complications. All 20 were infected with influenza A and all had underlying health conditions or suspected health complications. Their ages ranged from 41 to 90 years old.

Nationally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that flu illness peaked in February, but remains high for this time of year with 34 states, including Delaware, and Puerto Rico reporting widespread flu illnesses. The CDC expects flu activity to remain elevated for weeks.

Levels of flu-like illness in the United States have been at or above baseline for 18 weeks so far this season, on track for a relatively long season, possibly exceeding the previous five-year high of 20 weeks. In terms of severity, the CDC estimates that so far this season there have been as many as 508,000 flu hospitalizations and 46,800 deaths.

Unlike colds, which develop gradually, flu symptoms come on suddenly, and include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, headaches and body aches, chills, and fatigue. Some people develop complications including pneumonia, bronchitis, and sinus and ear infections. People with pre-existing health conditions such as diabetes and asthma are more susceptible to catching the flu.

DPH encourages Delawareans to take everyday steps to prevent the spread of the flu:

- Practice social distancing if you have cold or flu-like symptoms.
- Wash hands frequently with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizers.
- Cover sneezes and coughs with a tissue, and dispose of tissues immediately; if no tissue is available, sneeze or cough into your inner elbow.
- Take medications as prescribed.

Social distancing means that those sick with the flu should stay home from work, school, and other gatherings and not return until they have been free of fever – with a temperature of less than 100 degrees F (37.8 degrees C) without the use of fever-reducing medications for at least 24 hours. They should avoid close contact with well people in the household, and stay well-hydrated by drinking plenty of water and other clear liquids. Over-the-counter medicines can provide symptom relief, but if you suspect you have influenza, call your doctor as he or she may decide to provide antiviral medications to help hasten recovery and prevent serious complications. This is particularly important for those who

feel very sick, are pregnant, age 5 or younger, age 65 or older or have chronic medical conditions.

DPH also recommends that individuals with chronic diseases monitor and manage their conditions, as non-compliance with physician's recommendations can increase the risk for infection and complications. This includes maintaining appointments with their health care provider, taking medications as prescribed, and following diet and exercise recommendations from their doctor. Additionally, individuals who smoke and who are ready to stop using tobacco are encouraged to call the Delaware Quitline at 1-866-409-1858.

The CDC and DPH continue to recommend vaccination as long as influenza viruses are circulating and emphasize that it is not unusual for a second wave of flu activity during a flu season. The second wave is usually caused by an influenza B virus. This season, there has been very little influenza B virus activity.

Flu vaccines are still available at State Service Centers, primary care providers and specialists, pharmacies, and some grocery stores. To find participating stores, enter your zip code in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) flu vaccine finder at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>. For more information about the flu, visit flu.delaware.gov/ or call DPH at 1-800-282-8672. The CDC recommends use of any licensed, age-appropriate influenza vaccine, including inactivated influenza vaccine [IIV], recombinant influenza vaccine [RIV], or live attenuated influenza vaccine (LAIV). If you have questions about which vaccine is best for you, talk to your doctor or other health care professional. Flu shots are still available at DPH clinics located within the State Service Centers:

- Porter State Service Center, 509 W. Eighth St., Wilmington. For all ages 9 and up. Walk-ins are welcome
Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to noon and from 1:00

p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

- Hudson State Service Center, 501 Ogletown Road, Newark. For all ages, including children age 6 months and older. Call 302-283-7587 (choose Option 2) to make an appointment Monday through Friday.
- Williams State Service Center, 805 River Road, Dover. For all ages, including children age 6 months and older. Call 302-857-5140 to make an appointment Monday through Thursday, 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
- Milford State Service Center – Riverwalk, 253 N.E. Front St., Milford. For ages 9 years and older. Call 302-424-7130 to make an appointment on Mondays from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. and Wednesdays from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.
- Anna C. Shipley State Service Center, 350 Virginia Ave., Seaford. For all ages, including children age 6 months and older. Walk-ins welcome Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. For information, call 302-628-6772.
- Adams State Service Center, 544 S. Bedford St., Georgetown. For all ages, including children age 6 months and older. Call 302-515-3220 to make an appointment on Thursdays from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

For more information about flu surveillance in Delaware, read the weekly flu report at dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/epi/influenzawkly.html.

A person who is deaf, hard-of-hearing, deaf-blind or speech-disabled can call the DPH phone number above by using TTY services. Dial 7-1-1 or 800-232-5460 to type your conversation to a relay operator, who reads your conversation to a hearing person at DPH. The relay operator types the hearing person's spoken words back to the TTY user. To learn more about TTY availability in Delaware, visit <http://delawarerelay.com>.

The Department of Health and Social Services is committed to improving the quality of the lives of Delaware's citizens by promoting health and well-being, fostering self-sufficiency,

and protecting vulnerable populations. DPH, a division of DHSS, urges Delawareans to make healthier choices with the 5-2-1 Almost None campaign: eat 5 or more fruits and vegetables each day, have no more than 2 hours of recreational screen time each day (includes TV, computer, gaming), get 1 or more hours of physical activity each day, and drink almost no sugary beverages.